Remarks at the National Urban League Centennial Conference
July 29, 2010

The President. Thank you. Everybody, please have a seat. Have a seat. Take a load off. Thank you very much. Please, please, have a seat. Good morning, Urban Leaguers.

Audience members. Good morning.

The President. Well, it is wonderful to be here with all of you. It is wonderful to be here. And let me begin by congratulating Marc Morial for his outstanding leadership, his great friendship. I want to thank the entire National Urban League on your centennial. From your founding, amid the great migration, to the struggles of the civil rights movement, to the battles of today, the Urban League has been on the ground, in our communities, working quietly, day in, day out, without fanfare, opening up opportunity, rolling back inequality, making our Union just a little more perfect. So America is a better place because of the Urban League. And I'm grateful to all of you for the outstanding contributions that you've made.

Now, the last time I spoke with you was during your Orlando conference in August—[*applause*]—got Orlando in the house—[*laughter*]—Orlando conference back in August of 2008. I didn't have any gray hair back then. [*Laughter*]

Audience member. That's all right.

The President. Say, that's all right? [*Laughter*] Yes.

But I want to remind you what things were like in August of 2008. Our economy was in freefall. We had just seen 7 straight months of job loss. Foreclosures were sweeping the Nation. And we were on the verge of a financial crisis that threatened to plunge our economy into a second great depression.

So from the moment I took office, we had to act immediately to prevent an even greater catastrophe. And I knew that not everything we did would be popular. Sometimes when we do things, the scribes, the pundits here in Washington, they act surprised. They say, why would you do such a thing? It doesn't poll well. And I have to explain to them I've got my own pollsters. [*Laughter*] But I wasn't elected just to do what's popular; I was elected do what was right. That's what you supported me for.

And because of what we did, America, as a whole, is in a different place today. Our economy is growing, instead of shrinking. Our private sector has been adding jobs for 6 straight months, instead of losing them.

I was—[*applause*]—yesterday a report was put out by two prominent economists—one of them John McCain's old economist—that said if we hadn't taken the actions that we took, we would have had an additional 8 million people lose their jobs.

Now, that doesn't mean we're out of the woods yet. Every sector of our economy was shaking by the crisis, every demographic group felt its impact. And as has been true in the wake of other recent recessions, this one had an especially brutal impact on minority communities, communities that were already struggling long before the financial crisis hit.

The African American unemployment rate was already much higher, the incomes and wealths of African American families already lower. There was less of a cushion. Many minority

communities, whether in big cities or rural towns, had seen businesses and opportunities vanish for years, stores boarded up, young people hanging out on the street corners without prospects for the future.

So when we came in to office, we focused not just on rescuing our economy in the short run, but rebuilding our economy for the long run, creating an economy that lifts up all Americans—not just some, but all.

That's why we passed health insurance reform that will give every American more choices, more control over their health care, will narrow the cruel disparities between Americans of different backgrounds. That's why we passed Wall Street reform, not only to make sure that taxpayers aren't paying for somebody else's foolishness but also to protect consumers from predatory credit cards and lending practices, regulating everything from mortgages to payday loans, making sure that we're protecting our economy from the recklessness and irresponsibility of a few.

Across agencies, we're taking on the structural inequalities that have held so many of our fellow citizens back, whether it's making more housing available and more affordable, making sure civil rights and antidiscrimination laws are enforced, making sure our crime policy is not only tough but also smart. So yesterday we took an important step forward when Congress passed a fair sentencing bill that I look forward to signing into law, a bipartisan bill to help right a longstanding wrong by narrowing sentencing disparities between those convicted of crack cocaine and powder cocaine. It's the right thing to do. We've gotten that done.

So we've made progress. And yet for all of our progress—progress that's come through the efforts of groups like the Urban League, progress that makes it possible for me to stand here as President—we were reminded this past week that we've still got work to do when it comes to promoting the values of fairness and equality and mutual understanding that must bind us together as a nation.

Now, last week, I had the chance to talk to Shirley Sherrod, an exemplary woman whose experiences mark both the challenges we have faced and the progress that we've made. She deserves better than what happened last week, when a bogus controversy based on selective and deceiving excerpts of a speech led her—led to her forced resignation.

Now, many are to blame for the reaction and overreaction that followed these comments, including my own administration. And what I said to Shirley was that the full story she was trying to tell—a story about overcoming our own biases and recognizing ourselves in folks who, on the surface, seem different—is exactly the kind of story we need to hear in America.

It's exactly what we need to hear because we've all got our biases. And rather than jump to conclusions and point fingers and play some of the games that are played on cable TV, we should all look inward and try to examine what's in our own hearts. We should all make more of an effort to discuss with one another, in a truthful and mature and responsible way, the divides that still exist—the discrimination that's still out there, the prejudices that still hold us back—a discussion that needs to take place not on cable TV, not just through a bunch of academic symposia or fancy commissions or panels, not through political posturing, but around kitchen tables and water coolers and church basements and in our schools and with our kids all across the country.

And if we can have that conversation in our own lives and if we can take an opportunity to learn from our imperfections and our mistakes, to grow as individuals and as a country, and if we engage in the hard work of translating words into deeds—because words are easy and deeds

are hard—then I'm confident that we can move forward together and make this country a little more perfect than it was before.

Now, since we're on the topic of speaking honestly with one another, I want to devote the balance of my time, the balance of my remarks to an issue that I believe will largely determine not only African American success but the success of our Nation in the 21st century, and that is whether we are offering our children the very best education possible.

I know some argue that as we emerge from a recession, my administration should focus solely on economic issues. They said that during health care, as if health care had nothing to do with economics, said it during financial reform, as if financial reform had nothing to do with economics, and now they're saying it as we work on education issues. But education is an economic issue, if not the economic issue of our time.

It's an economic issue when the unemployment rate for folks who've never gone to college is almost double what it is for those who have gone to college. It's an economic issue when 8 in 10 new jobs will require workforce training or a higher education by the end of this decade. It's an economic issue when countries that outeducate us today are going to outcompete us tomorrow.

Now, for years, we've recognized that education is a prerequisite for prosperity. And yet we've tolerated a status quo where America lags behind other nations. Just last week, we learned that in a single generation, America went from number one to 12th in college completion rates for young adults—used to be number 1, now we're number 12.

At the same time, our eighth graders trail about 8—10 other nations—10 other nations in science and math. Meanwhile, when it comes to Black students, African American students trail not only almost every other developed nation abroad, but they badly trail their White classmates here at home, an achievement gap that is widening the income gap between Black and White, between rich and poor.

We've talked about it, we know about it, but we haven't done enough about it. And this status quo is morally inexcusable, it is economically indefensible, and all of us are going to have to roll up our sleeves to change it.

And that's why—[*applause*]—that is why, from day one of this administration, we've made excellence in American education, excellence for all our students, a top priority. And no one has shown more leadership on this issue than my Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, who is here today.

I chose Arne not only because he's a great ballplayer—[*laughter*]—now, Arne and I play a little bit on the weekends—I choose Arne because I knew that for him, closing the achievement gap, unlocking the potential of every child, isn't just a job, it's been the cause of his life.

Now, because a higher education has never been more important or more expensive, it's absolutely essential that we put a college degree within reach for anyone who wants it. And that's why we're making higher education more affordable, so we can meet the goals I've set of producing a higher share of college graduates than any other nation by 2020. I want us to be back at number 1 instead of number 12.

And in pursuit of that goal, we eliminated taxpayer subsidies to big banks. We saved tens of billions of dollars, and we used those savings to open the door to additional financial aid, to open the door for college to millions more students. This is something that a lot of you may not

be aware of, but we have added tens of billions of dollars that were going to bank middlemen so that that money is now going to students—millions more students who are getting scholarships to go to college. That's already been done. We're making loan repayment more manageable, so young people don't graduate—like Michelle and me—with such big loan payments every month.

Audience member. Thank you!

The President. You're welcome. That right there. [*Laughter*] Yes, you can relate. [*Laughter*]

And we're reinvesting in our Historically Black Colleges and Universities, our HBCUs. We are reinvesting in them, while at the same time reforming and strengthening our community college, which are great, undervalued assets, great assets that are a lifeline to so many working families in every community across America.

But here's the thing: Even if we do all this good stuff for higher education, too many of our children see college as nothing but a distant dream because their education went off the rails long before they turned 18. These are young people who've been relegated to failing schools in struggling communities, where there are too many obstacles, too few role models, communities that I represented as a State senator, communities that I fought to lift up as a community organizer.

I remember going to a school back in my organizing days and seeing children, young children, maybe 5 or 6, eyes were brimming with hope, had such big dreams for the future. You'd ask them, what do you want to be when you grow up? They'd want to be a doctor; they'd want to be a lawyer. And then I remember the principal telling me that soon, all that would change. The hope would start fading from their eyes as they started to realize that maybe their dreams wouldn't come to pass, not because they weren't smart enough, not because they weren't talented enough, but because through a turn of fate, they happened to be born in the wrong neighborhood. They became victim of low expectations, a community that was not supporting educational excellence.

And it was heartbreaking. It is heartbreaking. And it reinforced in me a fundamental belief that we've got an obligation to lift up every child in every school in this country, especially those who are starting out furthest behind.

That's why I want to challenge our States to offer better early learning options to make sure our children aren't wasting their most formative years so that they can enter into kindergarten already ready to learn, knowing their colors, knowing their numbers, knowing their shapes, knowing how to sit still. [*Laughter*] Right? That's no joke. You got to learn that, especially when you're a boy. [*Laughter*] That's why we placed such heavy emphasis on the education our children are getting from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Now, over the past 18 months, the single most important thing we've done—and we've done a lot. I mean, we—the Recovery Act put a lot of money into schools, saved a lot of teacher jobs, made sure that schools didn't have to cut back even more drastically in every community across this country. But I think the single most important thing we've done is to launch an initiative called Race to the Top. We said to States, if you are committed to outstanding teaching, to successful schools, to higher standards, to better assessments, if you're committed to excellence for all children, you will be eligible for a grant to help you attain that goal.

And so far, the results have been promising and they have been powerful. In an effort to compete for this extra money, 32 States reformed their education laws before we even spent a dime. The competition leveraged change at the State level. And because the standards we set were high, only a couple of States actually won the grant in the first round, which meant that the States that didn't get the money, they've now strengthened their applications, made additional reforms. Now 36 have applied in the second round, and 18 States plus the District of Columbia are in the running to get a second grant.

So understand what's happened. In each successive round, we've leveraged change across the country. And even students in those districts that haven't gotten a grant, they've still benefited from the reforms that were initiated. And this process has sown the seeds of achievement. It's forced teachers and principals and officials and parents to forge agreements on tough and often uncomfortable issues, to raise their sights and embrace education.

Now, for the most part, States, educators, reformers, they've responded with great enthusiasm around this promise of excellence. But I know there's also been some controversy about Race to the Top. Part of it, I believe, reflects a general resistance to change. We get comfortable with the status quo, even when the status quo isn't good. We make excuses for why things have to be the way they are. And when you try to shake things up, some people aren't happy.

There have been criticisms from some folks in the civil rights community about particular elements of Race to the Top. So I want to address some of those today. I told you we're going to have an honest conversation.

First, I know there's a concern that Race to the Top doesn't do enough for minority kids, because the argument is, well, if there's a competition, then somehow some States or some school districts will get more help than others. Let me tell you, what's not working for Black kids and Hispanic kids and Native American kids across this country is the status quo. That's what's not working. What's not working is what we've been doing for decades now.

So the charge that Race to the Top isn't targeted at those young people most in need is absolutely false because lifting up quality for all our children—Black, White, Hispanic—that is the central premise of Race to the Top. And you can't win one of these grants unless you've got a plan to deal with those schools that are failing and those young people who aren't doing well. Every State and every school district is directly incentivized to deal with schools that have been forgotten, been given up on.

I also want to directly speak to the issue of teachers. We may have some teachers here in the house. [*Applause*] I know Urban League has got some teachers. Nothing is more important than teachers. My sister is a teacher. I'm here because of great teachers. The whole premise of Race to the Top is that teachers are the single most important factor in a child's education from the moment they step into the classroom. And I know firsthand that the vast majority of teachers are working tirelessly, are passionate about their students, are often digging into their own pockets for basic supplies, are going above and beyond the call of duty.

So I want teachers to have higher salaries. I want them to have more support. I want them to be trained like the professionals they are, with rigorous residencies like the ones that doctors go through. I want to give them a career ladder so they've got opportunities to advance and earn real financial security. I don't want talented young people to say, I'd love to teach, but I can't afford it.

I want them to have a fulfilling and supportive workplace environment. I want them to have the resources, from basic supplies to reasonable class sizes, that help them succeed. And instead of a culture where we're always idolizing sports stars or celebrities, I want us to build a culture where we idolize the people who are shaping our children's future. I want some teachers on the covers of some of those magazines, some teachers on MTV, featured.

I was on the "The View" yesterday, and somebody asked me who Snooki was. I said, I don't know who Snooki is. [*Laughter*] But I know some really good teachers that you guys should be talking about. [*Laughter*] I didn't say the teacher part, but I just—[*laughter*]. The question is, who are we lifting up? Who are we promoting? Who are we saying is important?

So I am 110 percent behind our teachers. But all I'm asking in return—as a President, as a parent, and as a citizen—is some measure of accountability. So even as we applaud teachers for their hard work, we've got to make sure that we're seeing results in the classroom. If we're not seeing results in the classroom, then let's work with teachers to help them become more effective. If that doesn't work, let's find the right teacher for that classroom.

Arne makes the point very simply: Our children get only one chance at an education, so we need to get it right.

Now, I want to commend some of the teachers unions across this country who are working with us to improve teaching, like the Delaware Education Association, which is working with State leaders as part of their Race to the Top efforts, not only to set aside 90 minutes of collaboration time a week to improve instruction but to strengthen teacher development and evaluation. That's the right way to go.

So for anyone who wants to use Race to the Top to blame or punish teachers, you're missing the point. Our goal isn't to fire or admonish teachers; our goal is accountability. It's to provide teachers with the support they need to be as effective as they can be and to create a better environment for teachers and students alike.

Now, there's also the question of how hard our teachers should push students in the classroom. Nations in Asia and Europe have answered this question, in part by creating standards to make sure their teachers and students are performing at the same high levels throughout their nation. That's one of the reasons that their children are doing better than ours. But here at home, there's often a controversy about national standards, common standards—that violates the principle of local control. Now, there's a history to local control that we need to think about, but that's the argument.

So here's what Race to the Top says: Instead of Washington imposing standards from the top down, let's challenge States to adopt common standards voluntarily, from the bottom up. That doesn't mean more standards; it means higher standards, better standards, standards that clarify what our teachers are expected to teach and what our children are expected to learn, so high school graduates are actually prepared for college and a career. I do not want to see young people get a diploma, but they can't read that diploma.

Now, so far, about 30 States have come together to embrace and develop common standards, high standards. More States are expected to do so in the coming weeks. And by the way, this is different from No Child Left Behind, because what that did was it gave the States the wrong incentives. A bunch of States watered down their standards so that school districts wouldn't be penalized when their students fell short. And what's happened now is at least two States—Illinois and Oklahoma—that lowered standards in response to No Child Behind—No

Child Left Behind are now raising those standards back up, partly in response to Race to the Top.

And part of making sure our young people meet these high standards is designing tests that accurately measure whether they are learning. Now, here too there's been some controversy. When we talk about testing, parents worry that it means more teaching to the test. Some worry that tests are culturally biased. Teachers worry that they'll be evaluated solely on the basis of a single standardized test. Everybody thinks that's unfair. It is unfair.

But that's not what Race to the Top is about. What Race to the Top says is there's nothing wrong with testing; we just need better tests applied in a way that helps teachers and students, instead of stifling what teachers and students do in the classroom; tests that don't dictate what's taught, but tell us what has been learned; tests that measure how well our children are mastering essential skills and answering complex questions; and tests that track how well our students are growing academically, so we can catch when they're falling behind and help them before they just get passed along.

Because of Race to the Top, States are also finding innovative ways to move beyond having just a snapshot of where students are and towards a real-time picture that shows how far they've come and how far they have to go. And armed with this information, teachers can get what amounts to a game tape that they can study to enhance their teaching and their focus on areas where students need help the most.

Now, sometimes a school's problems run so deep that you can do the better assessments and the higher standards and a more challenging curriculum, and that's not enough. If a school isn't producing graduates with even the most basic skills—year after year after year after year—something needs to be done differently. You know, the definition, somebody once said, of madness is you do the same thing over and over again and keep expecting a different result. If we want success for our country, we can't accept failure in our schools decade after decade.

And that's why we're challenging States to turn around our 5,000 lowest performing schools. And I don't think it's any secret that most of those are serving African American or Hispanic kids. We're investing over $4 billion to help them do that, to transform those schools—$4 billion, which even in Washington is real money. This isn't about—unlike No Child Left Behind, this isn't about labeling a troubled school a failure and then just throwing up your hands and saying, well, we're giving up on you. It's about investing in that school's future and recruiting the whole community to help turn it around and identifying viable options for how to move forward.

Now, in some cases, that's going to mean restarting the school under different management as a charter school, as an independent public school formed by parents, teachers, and civic leaders who've got broad leeway to innovate. And some people don't like charter schools. They say, well, that's going to take away money from other public schools that also need support. Charter schools aren't a magic bullet, but I want to give States and school districts the chance to try new things. If a charter school works, then let's apply those lessons elsewhere. And if a charter school doesn't work, we'll hold it accountable, we'll shut it down.

So, no, I don't support all charter schools, but I do support good charter schools. I'll give you an example. There's a charter school called Mastery in Philadelphia. And in just 2 years, three of the schools that Mastery has taken over have seen reading and math levels nearly double, in some cases, triple. Chaka Fattah is here, so he knows what I'm talking about. One school called Pickett went from just 14 percent of students being proficient in math to almost

70 percent. Now—and here's the kicker: At the same time academic performance improved, violence dropped by 80 percent—80 percent. And that's no coincidence.

Now, if a school like Mastery can do it, if Pickett can do it, every troubled school can do it. But that means we're going to have to shake some things up: setting high standards, common standards, empowering students to meet them; partnering with our teachers to achieve excellence in the classroom; educating our children—all of them—to graduate ready for college, ready for a career, ready to make most of their lives. None of this should be controversial. There should be a fuss if we weren't doing these things. There should be a fuss if Arne Duncan wasn't trying to shake things up.

So Race to the Top isn't simply the name of an initiative. It sums up what's happening in our schools. It's the single most ambitious, meaningful education reform effort we've attempted in this country in generations.

And I know there are a number of other steps we need to take to lift up our education system—like saving teachers' jobs across this country from layoffs—and I'll continue fighting to take those steps and save those jobs. But I'll also continue to fight for Race to the Top with everything I've got, including using a veto to prevent some folks from watering it down.

Now, let me wrap up by saying this. I know there are some who say that Race to the Top won't work. There are cynics and naysayers who argue that the problems in our education system are too entrenched, that think that we'll just fall back into the same old arguments and divides that have held us back for so long. And it is true, as I've said since I ran for President, and that everybody here knows firsthand, change is hard. I don't know if you've noticed. That's why I've got all this gray hair. [*Laughter*]

Fixing what was broken in our health care system is not easy. Fixing what was broken on Wall Street is not easy. Fixing what's broken in our education system is not easy. We won't see results overnight. It may take a decade for these changes to pay off. But that's not a reason not to make them. It's a reason to start making them right now, to feel a sense of urgency, the fierce urgency of now.

We also know that as significant as these reforms are, there's going to be one more ingredient to really make a difference: Parents are going to have to get more involved in their children's education. Now, in the past, even that statement has sparked controversy. Folks say, well, why are you talking about parents? [*Laughter*] Parents need help too. I know that. Parents need jobs. They need housing. They need, in some cases, social services. They may have substance abuse problems. We're working on all those fronts.

Then some people say, well, why are you always talking about parental responsibility in front of Black folks? [*Laughter*] And I say, I talk about parental responsibility wherever I talk about education. Michelle and I happen to be Black parents, so—[*laughter*]—I may add a little umph to it when I'm talking to Black parents. [*Laughter*]

But to paraphrase Dr. King, education isn't an either-or proposition. It's a both-and proposition. It will take both more focus from our parents and better schooling. It will take both more money and more reform. It will take both a collective commitment and a personal commitment.

So, yes, our Federal Government has responsibilities that it has to meet, and I will keep on making sure the Federal Government meets those responsibilities. Our Governors, our superintendents, our States, our school districts have responsibilities to meet. And parents have

responsibilities that they have to meet. And our children have responsibilities that they have to meet.

It's not just parents. It's the children too. Our kids need to understand nobody is going to hand them a future. An education is not something you just tip your head and they pour it in your ear. [*Laughter*] You've got to want it. You've got to reach out and claim that future for yourself. And you can't make excuses.

I know life is tough for a lot of young people in this country. The places where Urban League is working to make a difference, you see it every day. I'm coming from the south side of Chicago, so I know—I see what young people are going through there. And at certain points in our lives, young Black men and women may feel the sting of discrimination. Too many of them may feel trapped in a community where drugs and violence and unemployment are pervasive, and they're forced to wrestle with things that no child should have to face.

There are all kinds of reasons for our children to say, "No, I can't." But our job is to say to them, "Yes, you can." Yes, you can overcome. Yes, you can persevere. Yes, you can make what you will out of your lives.

I know they can because I know the character of America's young people. I saw them volunteer on my campaign. They asked me questions in town hall meetings. They write me letters about their trials and aspirations.

I got a letter recently postmarked Covington, Kentucky. It was from Na'Dreya Lattimore, 10 years old, about the same age as Sasha. And she told me about how her school had closed, so she had enrolled in another. Then she had bumped up against other barriers to what she felt was her potential. So Na'Dreya was explaining to me how we need to improve our education system. She closed by saying this: "One more thing," she said—[*laughter*]—this is a long letter—[*laughter*]—"You need to look at us differently. We are not Black, we're not White, biracial, Hispanic, Asian, or any other nationality." No, she wrote, "We are the future."

Na'Dreya, you are right. And that's why I will keep fighting to lead us out of this storm. But I'm also going to keep fighting alongside the Urban League to make America more perfect so that young people like Na'Dreya, people of every race, in every region, are going to be able to reach for that American Dream. They're going to know that there are brighter days ahead, that their future is full of boundless possibilities. I believe that, and I know the Urban League does too.

Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:09 a.m. at the Washington Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Marc H. Morial, president and chief executive officer, National Urban League; Alan S. Blinder, Gordon S. Rentschler Memorial Professor of Economics, Princeton University; Mark Zandi, chief economist and cofounder, Moody's Economy.com, in his former capacity as chief economic adviser to 2008 Republican Presidential candidate Sen. John McCain; Shirley Sherrod, former USDA Georgia State Director for Rural Development, who was fired after the release of an edited video of remarks she had made at a March 2010 NAACP event; his sister Maya Soetoro-Ng; and Nicole "Snooki" Polizzi, castmember, MTV's "The Jersey Shore". He also referred to S. 1789.

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